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OCI No. 2944/65

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Office of Current Intelligence
22 November 1965

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Possible Changes in Vietnamese Communist
Military Doctrine and Leadership

1. Speculation regarding a possible shift in Communist military tactics in South Vietnam has been sparked by the unusual behavior of Communist forces in the Ia Drang River Valley. These actions give the impression that the Communists have thrown their traditional doctrine out of the window, and now are choosing to defend ground, rather than to withdraw and protect their main forces in the face of heavy casualties. Speculation regarding a shift in tactics has also been fueled by reports of possible dissatisfaction inside the DRV party hierarchy with Defense Minister Vo Nguyen Giap, the long-time mastermind of Vietnamese Communist military action.

2. Although the full story of the fighting in the Ia Drang Valley is not yet in, we are inclined to believe that the engagements, at the most, signal another step in the gradual evolution of Communist tactics according to the classical concepts put forward by Giap. We doubt, however, that they represent any abrupt departure from these concepts. We believe the stiffness of the Communist resistance there should be viewed mainly in relation to the probable special strategic situation of the valley. It may also be a reflection of the general growth in the insurgents' armed strength. In the past, as their strength has grown, the Communists have gradually engaged in more intensive action on a larger scale. Whether this portends an across-the-board increase in large scale

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action, with the Communists standing and fighting for territory, is hard to say on the basis of the Ia Drang action alone.

3. This action probably shows that the Communists from now on will be more willing to accept serious losses in main force strength in situations where the territory involved is of major importance to them, or where they believe the chances are good that equally heavy casualties can be inflicted on the US forces opposing them. Both these circumstances may appear to the Communists to obtain in the current Ia Drang fighting.

4. The broad river valley here provides some of the best terrain for the movement of supplies through Cambodia into the central highlands. The valley is surrounded by both gentle and sharp escarpments and dense forest cover which provide excellent defensive positions dominating the valley itself. MACV believes that an important Communist supply depot and base area is located northwest of the Chu Pong mountain area on the south side of the valley. Overrunning this base was in fact the original objective of the US forces. This is to be accomplished by a pincers move with ARVN forces coming in from the northwestern end of the valley against US forces moving north. Protection of the Chu Pong base may be of unusual importance to the Communists because of the probable difficulty of moving it into, and maintaining it effectively in, Cambodia.

5. There is an alternative explanation. Movement on a large scale through Cambodia presents serious political problems for the Viet Cong. Infiltration south from the roadheads on the Laos - South Vietnam border normally moves along routes within South Vietnam, one of which is close to the border. The Ia Drang Valley lies squarely across this route, and it is possible that the US incursion into this area has collided with major Communist troops movements southward.

6. The estimates now put over 3,000 Communist troops--most of them PAVN regulars--in the area. Our guess, in view of the losses already sustained and the demonstrated Communist ability to continue the

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battle in force, is that the actual Communist strength may be substantially greater than the estimated 3000.

7. Arrayed against the Communists during the past week has been one brigade of the US airmobile division. No more than three battalions--with some 1,600 combat infantrymen plus supporting artillery and logistic tail--were in action at any one time through 18 November in the Ia Drang action. In view of the Communists' strong defensive position and their apparent initial strength in manpower, it is quite possible that they believed they could trap and annihilate much of this US force. It is also likely, given their excellent intelligence system, that they have a good line on the status and strength of US reinforcements available and would get warning enough to pull out if the US tried to tip the balance by throwing in sizeable reserves.

8. There have been some indications that the indigenous Viet Cong forces in South Vietnam have been under increased pressure from the DRV to take larger-scale, direct action against US forces in the hope of inflicting heavy casualties. Hanoi propaganda, for example, wildly hailed the ambush on 11 November of a battalion of the US 1st Infantry Division northwest of Saigon as a sterling example of how ineffectual US forces are when the insurgents go all-out against them. Viet Cong propagandists have also boasted of the battle, described the tactics used in unusual detail, and called pointedly on other Viet Cong to do the same. This was actually one of the first instances in which Viet Cong main forces, apparently unaided by PAVN, attempted to take on sizeable American force in the field in a major engagement. (The actual losses in this engagement were 20 US killed against over 200 Viet Cong.)

9. The goal of the Vietnamese in attempting to run up US losses, even at the cost of disproportionate losses of their own, would be to produce a domestic outcry in America over the casualties, reminiscent of the Korean war which would pressure Washington into concessions on the conflict. Even short of this maximum expectation, the Communists may hope that massive US losses in a few instances might slow down the rate of American ground operations for a while and give the Communists a breather.

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10. Whether or not this is the case, it is pretty clear that the strategists in Hanoi still envisage a protracted war of attrition in South Vietnam. This was a major theme, for example, of an article in the September issue of an authoritative Hanoi party journal. According to the article, "to be successful in people's warfare...we must have the guts to fight for five, ten or twenty years and not to fight and win fast." The article went on to assert that "the revolutionary people must have time to wear out and annihilate the enemy." It warned that "we cannot think of deploying our troops and planning our military operations to strike one powerful blow to decide defeat or victory quickly." We believe this article mainly represents another counter in the running dispute between Chinese and North Vietnamese military strategists. Peking, it appears, has been urging Hanoi to move toward a near-conventional type military campaign in the South, which presumably would involve massive movement of PAVN to South Vietnam and an all-out commitment of Viet Cong main forces.

11. The reluctance of the Vietnamese Communist strategists to go beyond a measured escalation of the ground fighting in the South, calculated to gradually counter the US effort there, results in large part from the influence of DRV Defense Minister Giap. Giap, and probably most of his lieutenants, are convinced that the best hope for victory in the South is effective use of the same tactics used in the war against the French. This involved an interminable struggle in which the Communist forces relied heavily on guerrilla warfare. The object was to wear down the enemy's will to fight rather than to inflict complete military defeat upon him. This did not preclude large and bitter actions by the Communists when they believed them warranted. Giap's thesis relies ultimately on the ability of the Communists to bring the enemy to the negotiating table when his position is as poor as possible. Giap holds, however, that such a situation can arise before the enemy has been totally defeated.

12. So far as we can determine, General Giap and his henchmen are still firmly in control of the Vietnamese military establishment. Giap has been as active as ever in public lately, despite diplomatic reports to the contrary. One report stated that Giap was given a seat below his proper position at a reception

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on 1 October in honor of China's National Day. However, the party newspaper in listing those attending the function had Giap in his proper place in relation to others there. In one of his latest public appearances on 16 November, Giap was prominent among North Vietnamese dignitaries greeting a group of South Vietnamese "liberation heroes."

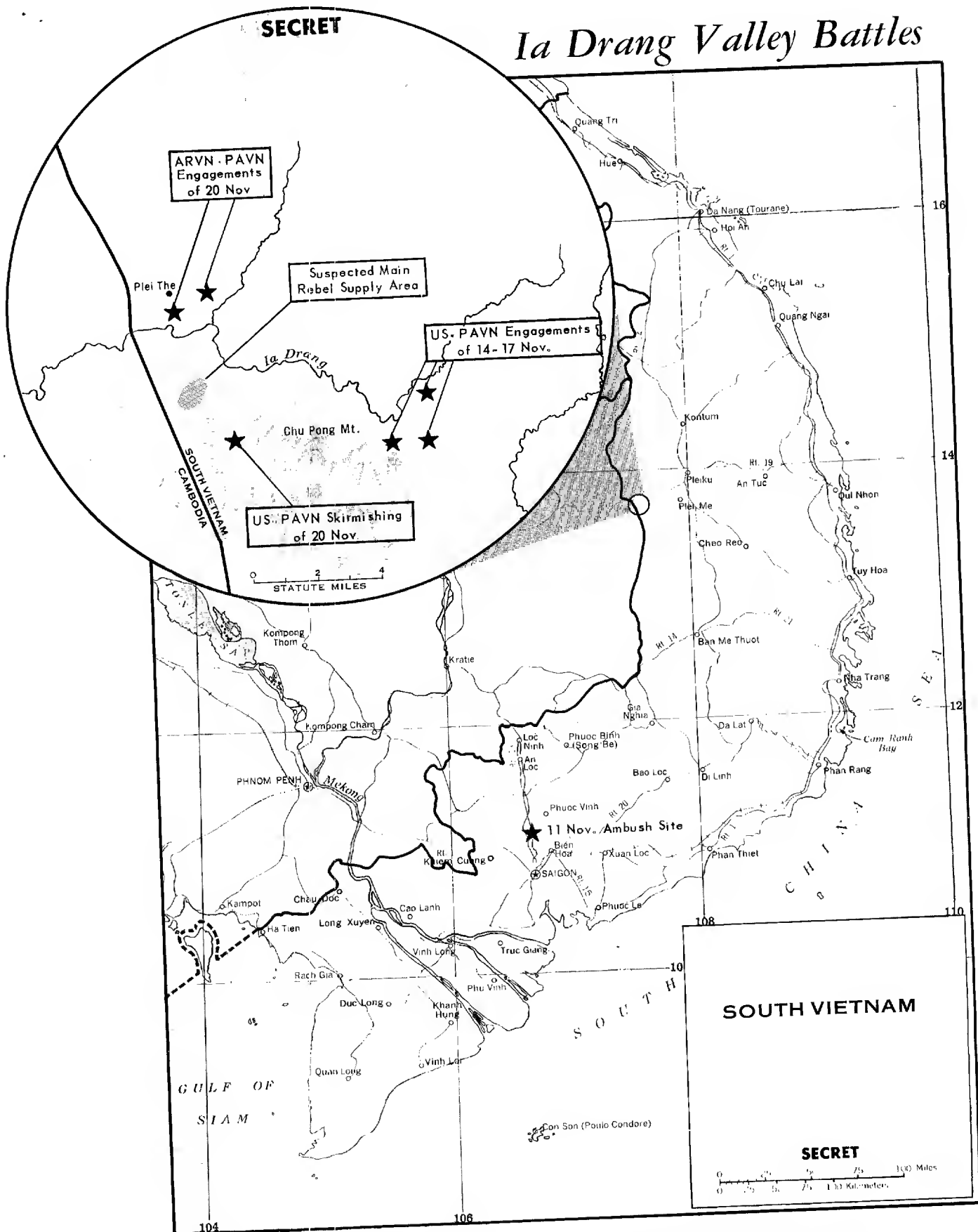
13. Giap is also said to have engaged in heated exchanges with other party leaders recently in public. The suggestion has been made that this is an indication that he is on the defensive and out of step with the other members of the Politburo. Unfortunately we do not know what the discussions were about. Giap for many years has had a reputation as a tough, no-give character, quick to assert his views regardless of the rank or politics of those present. There is, therefore, nothing really unusual in his holding forceful discussions with his fellow leaders.

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INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

POSSIBLE CHANGES IN VIETNAMESE COMMUNIST MILITARY DOCTRINE AND LEADERSHIP

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE
Office of Current Intelligence

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